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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000371

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MP CLAIMS AOUN READY FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Michel Aoun is embarked on a program to distance himself from the Hizballah-led opposition, according to Aoun Bloc MP Ibrahim Kanaan. Aoun's public statements at variance with Hizballah positions, his courting of the international community, his support for the international tribunal, his deemphasizing of the demand for early parliamentary elections, and his decision to lower the level of coordination with the opposition are all signs of a growing independence. Kanaan suggested that the Ambassador should give Aoun some credit for these moves at a March 12 dinner the Ambassador will attend at Aoun's home, and claimed that for his part Aoun would use the occasion to seek to normalize his relationship with the Embassy, build trust, and improve the atmosphere. Kanaan, fresh from a one-week working visit to the French Chamber of Deputies, expressed an interest in visiting Washington soon to pave the way for an eventual Aoun visit. Polchief advised caution on this topic and reminded Kanaan that Aoun's relationship with Hizballah would continue to hamstring USG relations with him until such time as that relationship is truly broken. End Summary.

INDEPENDENCE FROM HIZBALLAH

2. (C) Polchief called on Ibrahim Kanaan, MP and member of Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), March 8 to discuss Lebanon's evolving political situation and plans for a dinner invitation from Aoun to the Ambassador. Kanaan was eager to highlight the General's recent statements, which he said showed that Aoun is establishing policy positions independent of, and even contrary to, Hizballah's. For example, Aoun told a Qatari journalist the day before that he would not accept Hizballah's possession of weapons outside the context of the Lebanese state, and that there is no longer a place in Lebanon for Hizballah's "state within a state." (Note: The interview is on the FPM website, and in it Aoun also praises Qatari aid as the best aid because it comes without conditions -- this, from the party that warned that unconditional Paris III reconstruction aid would disappear into the coffers of corrupt GOL officials. End Note.) Kanaan denied a press report that Hizballah had laid down an ultimatum to Aoun to declare he would support a March 8 civil disobedience campaign. Civil disobedience is no longer under discussion within the opposition, he claimed.

13. (C) Aoun's arrangement with Hizballah and the March 8-Aoun protests in the center of Beirut had hurt FPM politically, Kenaan admitted. After a few bruising months, FPM is working hard to recoup supporters by clarifying its positions on several national issues, Kenaan continued. Aoun publicly expressed his support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) on several occasions and advocated the LAF's retention of a truckload of Hizballah weapons seized in February. Aoun also signed the Maronite Patriarch's Pact of Honor, Kenaan pointed out. Aoun is moving progressively farther and farther away from Hizballah, Kenaan claimed, with each statement and each opportunity to assert his independence.

#### BETTER RELATIONS WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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14. (C) Another motive for what Kenaan described as a determined FPM public relations campaign is to improve relations with the international community, in particular the USG, Kenaan said. (Note: The "campaign" may be less impressive than Kenaan claimed; Aoun has not been seen in public for weeks and his most recent true news splash was his early-February reaffirmation of the FPM Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah. Nevertheless, Kenaan seemed sincere and convinced of what he was saying. End Note.) FPM needs to find a way to make Aoun's actions count in terms of policymaker opinion in Washington and Paris. Kenaan has also been involved in secret talks with Saudi Ambassador Abdelaziz Khoja, he claimed, after Khoja sought him out as one of the more moderate MP's in Aoun's bloc. Kenaan had to clarify to Khoja Aoun's decision not to travel to Saudi Arabia in November; Kenaan told Khoja that Aoun had not declined the invitation, but that the assassination of Pierre Gemayel had

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rendered such a trip inappropriate. After the clarification, Khoja renewed the invitation to Aoun to visit Saudi Arabia both on a personal trip and, separately, as part of a proposed national dialogue session in Riyadh to settle Lebanon's political crisis. (Note: Khoja gives a quite different account. He says that the Aoun deputies have approached him to request that Saudi Arabia invite Aoun; Saudi Arabia is mulling over the request but has made no decision. Certainly, an official visit to Saudi Arabia would be a PR coup for Aoun. End note.)

#### SUPPORT FOR TRIBUNAL INCONTESTABLE

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15. (C) Aoun would also like to use his strong support for the tribunal to rebuild international confidence in him, Kenaan said. In a recent visit to the French National Assembly, Kenaan told French legislators that the FPM's support for the international tribunal is unconditional and incontestable, whether or not (as some participants had objected) the Brammertz Commission produces the names of any suspects and whether or not the tribunal text is amended. The tribunal is essential to stop Lebanon's political violence and to achieve justice for the wave of attacks that began in 2004. When Polchief pointed out that functionally speaking, the FPM position on the tribunal seems no different from the position shared by Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt, Kenaan denounced the two March 14 stalwarts for "exploiting" the tribunal issue for political gain. Jumblatt is playing the same game that Druse leaders have had to play for decades, i.e. maintaining a volatile political flexibility to ensure that he can make himself useful to whichever party appears to be on the rise. Geagea, he explained, wants to stay in front of Aoun on the tribunal issue because he knows that once Aoun enters the cabinet with four or five ministers, Geagea's relevance in the GOL will tumble. (Comment: The normally cool Kenaan became relatively agitated on the subject of Geagea, leaving the impression that Aoun's people have been shaken by the recent prominence of the Lebanese Forces leader. End Comment.)

¶6. (C) Kenaan minimized media reports that Aoun had dropped his demand for early parliamentary elections, but confirmed that the demand is no longer "unequivocal" and that there is great flexibility in FPM's position. With the collapse of the four-party pact which determined the makeup of Lebanon's government in 2005 (and which left Aoun without cabinet representation) new elections are appropriate to reflect the will of the people. Nevertheless, if replacing President Lahoud as a first step is proposed as part of a solution to the crisis, Aoun and his followers would negotiate on that basis. They would reserve the right to differ and make counterproposals, but would not interrupt the forward motion of any process to solve the crisis. Of course, replacing Lahoud now would solve nothing, Kenaan added. Without a broader political solution, no new president would bring with him a vision for the country.

POLITICAL SETTLEMENT  
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¶7. (C) On the negotiations toward a political settlement, Kenaan said that Aoun and FPM supported the proposal for a possible meeting in Saudi Arabia. He acknowledged that Aoun's nephew Alain had called on Speaker Berri to ask that the Speaker's proposal emphasize reform of the electoral law. (Note: The Berri proposal does mention electoral law reform, but as its last point, and commits to nothing more than "discussion paving the way to its passage" in the Chamber of Deputies. End Note.) Kenaan hinted that FPM would have more to add to the Riyadh talks, should they occur.

FPM KREMLINOLOGY  
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¶8. (C) Kenaan claimed that Aoun has developed a new point of view lately, emphasizing a return to core FPM values. (Note: Without Kenaan mentioning it, Polchief took him to mean the values espoused in the 2005 Orange Book. End Note.) Aoun son-in-law Gebran Bassil is recovering well at Aoun's Rabieh

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home, but will not walk for at least six weeks more. As for news reports that Aoun's nephew Alain would replace Bassil in his role of liaison with the opposition, Kenaan declared them baseless. Rather, Kenaan claimed, FPM would simply not send high-level representatives to opposition meetings for at least as long as it takes for Bassil to recover. This is a deliberate decision, he claimed, designed to loosen FPM's ties to Hizballah.

DINNER CONVERSATION  
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¶9. (C) Finally, Kenaan and Polchief discussed possible topics of conversation for a dinner to which Aoun will invite the Ambassador on March 12. Kenaan advised that the two sides focus on improving the atmosphere, normalizing the relationship, and building trust between them, even if that meant discussing generalities. Kenaan asked that the Ambassador make a gesture of appreciation for Aoun's recent constructive positions, and that he also hail Aoun's responsible leadership of the Christian community. (He cited Aoun's refusal to react to what he called "provocations" and finger-pointing following Pierre Gemayel's assassination; what he called Aoun's action to stop the January 23 demonstrations; his signing of the Pact of Honor; and his efforts to "democratize" Christian politics by rejecting political violence.) Kenaan ask that the Ambassador also make a statement in support of electoral law reform, as Aoun views the reform as his legacy and also as his "way out" of the opposition. He needs the reform, Kenaan explained, so that he can tell his followers he did not take them to the streets for no reason other than to gain a few seats in the

cabinet. Polchief replied that all these topics should be acceptable, and noted that a MEPI-funded election law reform public awareness campaign would kick off within a week, possibly by the time of the dinner.

WASHINGTON-BOUND?  
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¶10. (C) Finally, Kenaan floated the idea that he should visit Washington soon to seek to explain FPM positions and mend fences, paving the way for an eventual visit by Aoun himself.

Polchief told Kenaan that he and Aoun should be realistic about the USG's stance and the chances of putting together a worthwhile agenda. There is no USG program to weaken or destroy FPM, Polchief noted, even after frictions and irritants such as Aoun's denunciations of USG and French policy toward Lebanon over the past several months. Rather, among all the problems we might have with Aoun and his party, by far the greatest issue is FPM's arrangement with Hizballah. Hizballah is a true red line, he noted, because of its acts of terrorism against Americans and others inside Lebanon and out, and because of Hizballah's actions that started the war with Israel last summer. Until such time as the MOU with Hizballah is officially repudiated, it would be hard to imagine a warm welcome for Aoun in Washington. Kenaan took this on board and promised to reserve the topic for later discussion at the working level rather than to raise it at the dinner.

FELTMAN